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Durand, Nov. 6th, 1878. 26-21v

D. K. SIMONDS,

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Manchester, Vt., April 10th, 1879. 27v

BILL MARSTON, THE TRAPPER.

BY GOODRICH.

In the autumn of 1866 I concluded to go on a hunting trip to the head waters of the Connecticut—the North Branch—and I speedily found myself traveling in a northwest direction, well supplied with the simple necessities for a six months' sojourn in that region. I had provided myself with a monstrous Kentucky rifle, which in itself was a heavy load, but which I valued highly on account of its accuracy and long range. My companion in this expedition was an old trapper, with whom I had become intimate at a trading post. He had taken a fancy to me at a shooting match, wherein I had won the enviable reputation of the crack shot. This was no mean distinction where eight out of ten bullets were always put in the bull-eye, of about one and a half inches in diameter, at a distance of eighty yards. This excellence as a rifleman stood me in good stead as the sequel will show. My companion was a tall, raw-boned, heavy shouldered man, whose nationality would have puzzled a physiognomist, as nothing of his face could be seen but a very large Roman nose, a pair of piercing grey eyes, and an unlimited quantity of grizzled beard. He said little of himself, except that he had been trapped and hunted off and on for he didn't know how long in these parts, and he said that he had been a "red find" his old grizzled karkies out there some day, for he couldn't abide the settlements no how. As for his variety, about twenty-five years of age, and a Canadian by birth. I had spent some years in the Hudson Bay territory and was on my way southward when I formed the idea of joining Bill Marston in his winter's hunt.

Marston's reputation as a keen and wary hunter stood high among the band of which he had been a "quint" member, and it was admitted that he could draw a quicker and truer bead than any man thereabouts. He never hunted in company with others of his class, but came and went—no one knew whence or whither; and the surprise was great when I was seen stepping into his old dog out and taking a hand in the management of that rather ticklish craft. I even heard another grizzled, buck-skinned old trapper say that he proposed accompanying my companion, but he had been repulsed in pretty short order; and now, said the indignant trapper, spitting out a huge flood of tobacco juice, he's stuck that young unsteady to keep him in perpetual hot water. Marston must have heard this, as I did, but he took no notice of it; and I, a little taken down, was glad when he gave the dugout a strong push off shore, and sprang in with an astonishing agility for a man of his age, which I afterwards learned was over fifty.

We were about three weeks in reaching Marston's camp—far, far from any human habitation, except the occasional wigwam of some Indian hunter, engaged like ourselves. Part of the way we sailed along in our dugout between the beautifully tinted and ever varying tree clad banks of the river, pushing along by day as rapidly as possible against the strong current, and carefully drawing up our canoe under some overhanging tree, passing the night enveloped in our warm blankets.

At the end of two weeks we arrived at a fork of the river, where we left our canoe—concealing it in the hollow of a cotton wood log, which Marston had used for this purpose many years. He told me there was a considerable fall a short distance above the fork, over which we could not get the canoe; so we shouldered our packs and made the rest of our journey on foot.

On the fourth day of our march, Marston's keen eye detected Indian signs here and there along our route; and while he seemed to feel annoyed at being met with and perhaps his traps stolen, it did not greatly affect me, as I knew that all the tribes of British Indians were on friendly terms with the Company and the hunters.

At length we reached the lodge as Marston invariably called his hut, without seeing anything more of the Indians, and my host's temper was visibly improved when he found everything was exactly as he left it sometime before. He at once commenced initiating me into the art of making up and setting traps for mink, beaver and otter, with which the river and adjacent meadows seemed to be alive and in a short time I could do this as well as my teacher, though perhaps less expeditiously.

One morning, after we had been thus occupied about three weeks, and had taken and cured a large number of fine skins, Marston got up and went out very early, saying that he would visit some distant otter traps that had been set a long time. I remained in camp for several hours, but finally, after saying a visit to all the other traps in our neighborhood—re-setting that had been sprung—I took my rifle and went in search of game to supply our larder. This usually fell to my lot, and it was by no means a laborious occupation, as deer were plenty and tame, while partridge and grouse flew up at almost every step.

I had been out about an hour and had bagged several fine birds, and was intentionally looking up into a giant old pine for one of a covey I had just flushed, when the distant report of a rifle broke the stillness of the mid forest air. It seemed to me as if there were two reports almost simultaneously; just as I came to the conclusion that it must have been the echo of Marston's gun, the thought suddenly struck me that he had that morning lost his rifle at the old tree, as he expected to be taken with his rifle on his return, and the rifle would make his journey rather irksome.

No sooner had this flashed through my mind than I felt sure that some of the wandering Indians, who perhaps knew of Marston's solitary habits, had attempted to murder him for his peltries and traps.

Leaving the partridge undiscovered, I hastily returned in the direction of the camp. Among the first things that caught my eye on reaching it was a small wisp of smoke hanging from the smoke hole of my gun usually hung, and on looking at the inside of this I read the following words: "rudely scrawled thereon with the point of a bullet."

Injuns air round. I've been hit. Keep dark. Foller round by Otter Bluff. This confirmed my worst suspicions and I hastily turned to obey the injunctions of my wounded friend, when, I thought me that I had better conceal some of my effects and secrete the most valuable of the peltries. Imagine my surprise when I found most of the furs gone, as well as every article of mine, or indeed, anything that would betray the fact that two men lived in the camp. I did not quite comprehend this maneuver until some time afterwards. I then quietly crawled through the woods to the collection of rocks that my friend, for some fanciful reason of his own, had chosen to call Otter Bluff. It was late in the day when I arrived at the bluff, and mounted wearily to the top. I looked around for Marston, but he was no where to be seen. Fearing that he had fainted from the loss of blood I made a careful though cautious search among the crags and ravines where a man might possibly have dragged himself. But I could see no sign of him, and concluded that through weakness he had not been able to get there as soon as I had; so I sat myself down in a little thicket of young cedars that crowned one of the peaks, where I could see without being seen myself, to await his coming. Here I crouched till dark, and still no signs of my comrade. Tormenting doubts now beset my mind and I began to fear that Marston had been captured in his retreat to the bluff, or that he had been unable to see it through loss of blood; and even pictured him lying among the maple leaves stained with a deeper hue than their own dye, perishing from thirst and faintness.

While debating what course to pursue, I perceived a bright light a mile or more off—I could scarcely say how far it might be in the gathering darkness; but as no attempt at concealment was made, I concluded it proceeded either from Marston, who had outwitted his enemies, or from those enemies themselves, who, in that event, I thought must have captured or killed my poor friend in spite of his keen woodcraft, as otherwise they would be too wary to draw on themselves the vengeance of the wounded trapper. I immediately descended from my perch and cautiously crept along the shaded edge of the river, keeping well under the overhanging branches of the bordering cedars. In this way I must have crept forward for full an hour, and still the fire seemed far away. As I stepped out in the bend of the river, on the side of which the fire burned with increased fury, a large owl flew from his perch in an overhanging tree, and silently betook himself to safer distance from his natural enemy. As the ill omened bird spread his soft, noisily wings to the night air, I thought me that, if Marston was near, I could communicate my presence to him by imitating his cry, which I had often repeated in the past when we were listening to the awakening choruses outside. Placing my hand upon my mouth, I emitted three or four of those weird, dismal cries, which were re-echoed by the sombre woods until the sombre river bend returned its ghostly answer.

Hastily looking to my rifle, and assuring myself that the priming was all right, I hurried on silently and stealthily until within an eighth of a mile of the light. When I parted the branches behind whose shade I had cautiously advanced, and looked in the direction of the blaze, I beheld a sight that sent the blood cold and chill back to my heart. Before me, on the grassy plot in front of our hut, were seated three brawny savages, naked, and painted with black and vermilion stripes and two others with similar costume, were dancing around a young birch tree to which was bound hand and foot, poor Bill Marston!

I waited to hear no more, hurrying forward as rapidly as possible from the nature of the ground and my desire to be main unseen, I soon came to a quick grove of trees in the midst of which our hut had been built. There was, of course no hut now. Everything was destroyed, that would have been useless to our savage foes; the rest most likely lying in full view of their miserable owners. On my hands and knees I forced my way silently through the thick underwood until within forty yards of the hostile circle. This movement of course had taken some time—for to break a twig or stir a leaf would have insured my destruction—and when I parted the branches before me I found the two Indians busily piling around their prisoner materials for a fire wherewith to roast him. I plainly saw that prompt action would alone save Marston, who was cowering the blasted, sneaking, cowardly, red skinned heathen, with every variety of oath known to the fraternity—and there were some strange ones.

The three savages that looked on were sitting upon a log half buried upon the mossy earth, and the idea struck me that as my rifle threw a bullet with very great force, if I could get them all in a line, I might kill them all at one shot, or at all events, kill one and severely wound the other two. I therefore crept silently back and considerably further to the right where, much to my gratification, I found I could draw bead on their three heads in a line.

I had just got into my new position and was pushing my rifle before me over a log when I intended springing up at the pile, and saw a new light spring up at the pile, and soon the fire formed a bright circle around my doimed friend. At the same moment the most distant of the savages arose, and in another moment would doubtless have joined the yelling fiends around the fire; but with a quick glance

along the barrel of my trusty rifle I sent the bullet fourth on its errand of death. The two painted serpents on the log fell backward, and the other sprang into the air with a howl of pain. With a maniacal yell—strategically followed by Marston—I rushed forward and leveled one of the two hideous imps dancing around the fire who were taken too much by surprise to know whether the attack was made by one or a score. The other with his wounded comrade, fled affrighted into the woods, while I scattered the burning pile and cut the bonds of my friend. No sooner was he free than he bounded to the log behind which the two victims lay silent in death, and seizing their rifles, dashed into the dark shadows of the forest, shouting to me to follow him. In a few minutes we were far beyond the betraying light of the scattered fire, when, suddenly stopping his rapid though silent advance, Marston caught my arm and told me to reload my rifle, at the same time testing the captured weapons, which he found already charged. I was eager to get as great a distance from our enemies as possible and so told Marston; but he soon convinced me that it would only bring on the destruction I would escape. For, said he, if them red skin' diskliver that they aren't chased, they won't run far; and the chances are that they raise our bar so we'd be asleep an hour of our first bivouac.

In order to ascertain if the Indians had really left us, and if not, to wipe them out as soon as possible, it was finally determined that I should return to the ambush whence I had fired on them, and watch the opposite side of the valley for their return, whilst my companion would creep silently around to the tickets opposite, wherein the savages had disappeared. At sunrise we were to meet at the old bluff and compare notes. As soon as this arrangement had been agreed upon Marston disappeared noiselessly into the darkness, and falling on my hands and knees, I cautiously retraced my steps to the old camp and having securely hidden myself from any outside observation in the thick cedars, peered through a tangled bush in my front for signs of life on the opposite bank.

The fire had not yet died out, and the red light reflected from the stream in front lighted up the opposite shore with a weird radiance, which, with my excited brain, kept me fully awake watching the huge shadows that chased each other along the margin of the sombre woods. The minutes seemed hours to me, as I thus lay in wait, and, as the night air curbed my bounding pulse, I found myself wondering at the nonchalance with which I regarded my then present occupation and the still visible bodies of the slain—slain, too, by my own hand!